



Strategic Plan 2021–2024





Chair's foreword

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration sets out Australia's vision for an excellent and equitable education system, where all children and young people become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community.

AERO Board Directors:

Emeritus Professor Colleen Hayward AM
(Deputy Chair)
Professor Sir Kevan Collins
Ms Judith Fahey
Ms Kerri Jones
Dr Anne Kennedy
Ms Leslie Loble
Mr Roger Massy-Greene AM

These are – rightfully – ambitious goals.

Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and schools are working hard towards these goals and many are achieving impressive results. Yet as a nation, we face some considerable challenges.

Evidence offers us a pathway through challenges that have constrained our nation's educational improvements over recent decades.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has been created to bring high-quality research evidence to education practitioners and policymakers and to foster its effective use, so that children and young people can achieve the best possible outcomes.

To achieve this purpose AERO must actively engage with the education community. We must listen to learners themselves, to practitioners and to policymakers and then prioritise work in those areas most relevant to their needs.

We will also leverage the wealth of existing research expertise across Australia and internationally, to fill gaps in our knowledge base that impede our progress.

In addition we must curate, present and disseminate high-quality evidence, both our own and that generated by others, in such a way as to engage the diverse audiences in Australian education.

And finally we must work with early childhood services, schools, systems and sectors to continuously improve our understanding of one of the greatest knowledge gaps of all – how best to support effective evidence use in education settings to improve children's learning.

AERO is a vital addition to the national education landscape. My fellow Board Directors and I are proud to present AERO's first Strategic Plan and look forward to assisting the organisation to have a lasting, positive impact on education in Australia.

Dr Lisa O'Brien
Chair



CEO's message

The education of Australian children and young people should be informed by the best evidence. But great evidence will only lead to better learning if practitioners and policymakers are able to use that evidence in their work. AERO will tackle both tasks: we will generate, identify and present high-quality evidence to education professionals and we will shine a light on the conditions necessary to support the adoption and effective implementation of that evidence in practice and policy.

The benefits of greater use of evidence affect all parts of education. To teachers, early childhood educators, school and service leaders, education officials and policymakers, evidence offers confidence in the choices and progress they are making. Evidence can enhance their sense of professionalism, as well as the wider community's understanding of, and respect for, the complex, highly skilled work they do. The ultimate benefit of evidence-based practice is the improved knowledge and skills of our learners.

In the following pages, we set out how AERO will take its first steps in contributing to the national project of improving the educational achievement of our children and young people.

Whatever role you play in our dynamic education system, I invite you to join us in this work.

Dr Jenny Donovan
CEO

Our objectives

AERO's vision is for Australia to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people through effective use of evidence.

In support of this vision, we:



generate
high-quality
evidence



present high-
quality evidence
that is relevant
and accessible



encourage adoption
and effective
implementation of
evidence in practice
and policy

AERO's theory of change



AERO's key actions



Outputs



Outcomes



Vision

Generate high-quality evidence

- Undertake research to resolve key evidence gaps, engaging partners and methods as best suited to each question
- Link and analyse data to better understand education challenges and opportunities
- Ensure rigorous and ethical conduct of research

Present high-quality evidence that is relevant and accessible

- Synthesise existing high-quality evidence relevant to Australia's education needs
- Curate high-quality resources from other rigorous evidence brokers relevant to these needs
- Translate AERO's own research into useful resources for practitioners and policymakers
- Develop and test all of AERO's resources with key audiences to ensure they are engaging and actionable
- Publish resources on AERO's website, disseminate them proactively and engage partners to extend their reach
- Observe the use of AERO's publications and resources to continually improve their effectiveness

Encourage adoption and effective implementation of evidence in practice and policy

- Build a culture of continuous, confident evidence use
- Undertake partnerships with services, systems and sectors to investigate, test and promote the strategies needed to support greater evidence use
- Quantify and monitor the use of evidence in Australian education

An expanded and evolving evidence base exists as to the most effective strategies to address Australia's education challenges

Evidence to inform decision-making in education is presented in a well-organised, engaging and actionable manner that is valued by practitioners and policymakers

Practitioners and policymakers are supported to deepen their understanding of why and how to effectively implement evidence

Services, systems and sectors are supported to deepen their understanding of the strategies needed to promote greater evidence use by practitioners and policymakers

Practitioners and policymakers regularly access high-quality evidence to inform their decisions

Practitioners and policymakers are motivated, confident and effectively supported to use evidence in their work

Practitioners and policymakers adopt and effectively implement evidence-based strategies

Australia achieves excellent and equitable education outcomes for all children and young people

Our approach

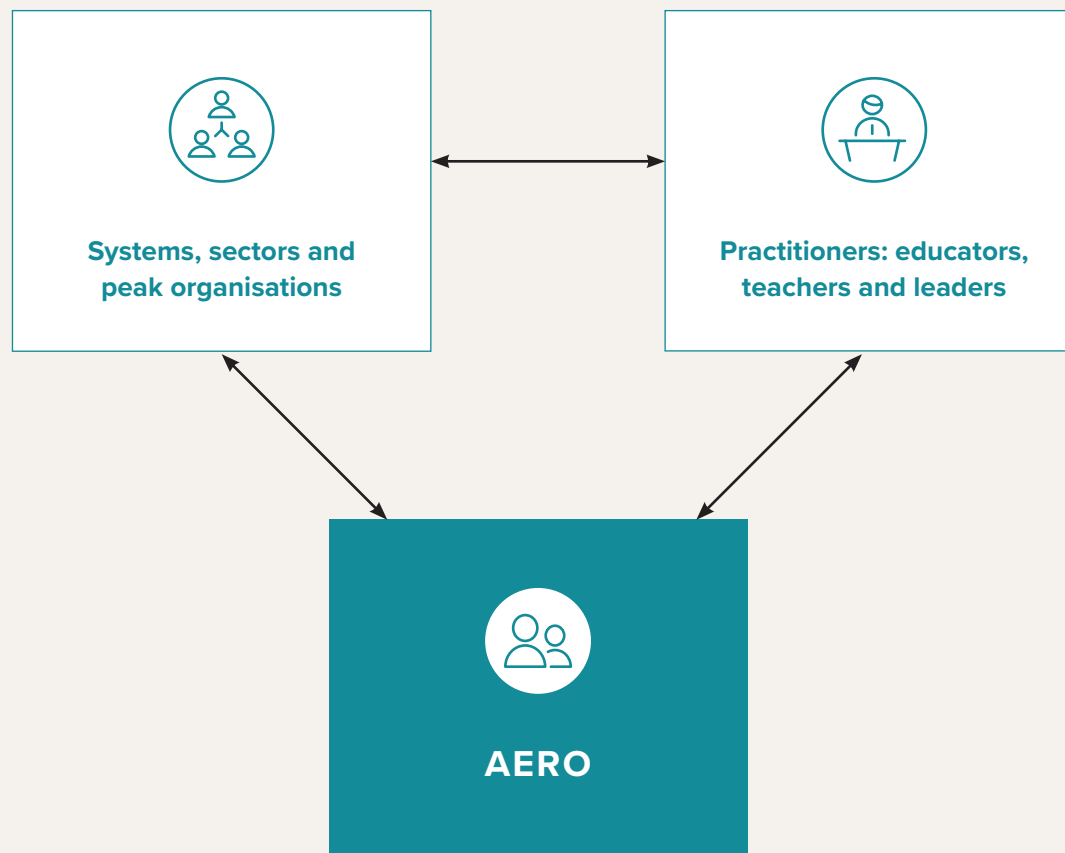
Working with partners

AERO understands the importance of actively engaging and supporting partners at all levels to achieve its outcomes.

AERO engages directly with practitioners. We invite practitioner input into our Research Agenda. Our publications and resources are freely available and are designed and tested to ensure they are relevant, accessible, engaging and actionable. We seek feedback on our resources and observe their use in practice to continually improve their effectiveness.

AERO knows that changing practice in education settings requires time, coherent messaging and resources, and ongoing support. Those who manage and lead early childhood services and schools are best placed to ensure these conditions. AERO takes care to ensure its work responds to the needs of these partners, is produced with their maximum engagement, and can be used by them in their contexts to support improvement.

The ways AERO seeks to engage and support our partners are indented and marked with a vertical green line throughout this document.



Our values

AERO's team and partnerships are guided by these values.



Ambition

We have an unwavering commitment to achieving excellence and equity in Australian education.



Collaboration

We work with others to expand the depth, breadth and impact of education evidence.



Rigour

We apply relentless attention and care to ensure our work is of the highest standard.



Diversity & inclusivity

We seek and learn from difference of background, opinion and experience. We ensure the many contexts and experiences of Australian education are embedded in our work.



Transparency & integrity

We build trust by being honest, sharing our work and supporting new ideas. We welcome scrutiny to enhance the integrity of our processes.

Our commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

AERO is committed to making a positive contribution to the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

As a new organisation, AERO is seeking to build its relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, hear their priorities and understand how these communities would like us to work together. AERO is developing its Reconciliation Action Plan over the course of 2021 to make sure it contains concrete, meaningful actions – regarding both the work we do and the way we do it – that reflect the expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

AERO's research is governed by its **Principles for the ethical and responsible conduct of research** and the **AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research**



Our work

Publish an annual Research Agenda

AERO publishes an annual Research Agenda, listing the key areas of research on which we will work. Areas of research are prioritised for the Research Agenda using demand-led and evidence-led criteria.

AERO determines demand via online mechanisms, through which practitioners are invited to submit their needs on an ongoing basis, and by liaising with representative and professional associations and with the leadership of systems, sectors and peak organisations.

AERO determines the areas of research that the existing evidence base suggests would most improve excellence and equity via our ongoing monitoring of emerging data and research, liaison with other education researchers, and in consultation with our expert Research Committee. AERO considers the scalability of potential solutions within Australian education as a factor in determining their likely impact.

The Research Agenda is developed with AERO's independent Board and approved by Education Ministers.



Evidence-led

What areas does the evidence base suggest would most improve excellence and equity?

Demand-led

What does the education community nominate as the most pressing challenges?



Generate high-quality evidence

Undertake research to resolve key evidence gaps, engaging partners and methods as best suited to each question

For each area of research that has been prioritised, AERO starts with what is already known about that topic.

For some areas, there may be no, or insufficient, existing research evidence. In these cases, AERO leads the generation of new, high-quality evidence. Research may be conducted by AERO itself, or in partnerships, or commissioned from other research experts.

AERO's priority is to deeply engage partners so they can learn with us from research projects and drive change as a result of findings. For each research project, AERO convenes a project advisory group comprising representatives of interested systems, sectors and peak organisations, as well as expert researchers and practitioners. These advisory groups will function differently depending on the scope and scale of the project, providing input to ensure the work is relevant to the needs of the education community. Systems, sectors and peak organisations are invited to nominate research sites and can partner in field work. The group reviews and discusses findings, with input into the recommendations and the format in which they are presented.

Link and analyse data to better understand education challenges and opportunities

AERO works to maximise the insights that can be drawn from data about Australian education. It collects, links and analyses data from a range of sources, including longitudinal data sets. This work allows us to identify and better understand trends in education. It also provides correlational evidence on education practices, programs or policies and identifies promising approaches for future causal evaluation.

Ensure rigorous and ethical conduct of research

AERO's processes to ensure its work is rigorous and ethical have been developed in consultation with established research bodies, systems and sectors, are publicly available on AERO's website, and include:

- **Standards of evidence**, which set out AERO's position on what constitutes rigorous and relevant evidence, and provide a basis for consistent, transparent decisions regarding research design and interpretation
- **Principles for the ethical and responsible conduct of research** and processes for project approval and oversight
- **Quality assurance** and peer review processes.

Present high-quality evidence that is relevant and accessible

Synthesise existing high-quality evidence relevant to Australia's education needs

For some areas in AERO's Research Agenda, robust evidence already exists. In these cases, AERO does not duplicate with new primary research. The task is one of synthesis – analysing the existing research to identify the highest quality findings and presenting them in a way that facilitates their dissemination, adoption and implementation.

AERO uses the same standards of evidence in assessing research for inclusion in synthesis projects as it uses to design primary research.

AERO convenes project advisory groups for larger synthesis projects or groupings of topics for synthesis work. These processes may be truncated for smaller projects.

Curate high-quality resources from other rigorous evidence brokers

For other topics, not only will substantial evidence already exist, but others will have already transformed it into highly effective publications and resources. Rather than duplicate, AERO seeks to curate and promote this work.

AERO uses the same standards of evidence to make determinations regarding the quality of resources considered for promotion in this way.

AERO engages other evidence brokers who hold similar standards of evidence to maximise the coverage of topics for which high-quality resources can be made available to the Australian education community.

Translate AERO's own research into useful resources for practitioners and policymakers

Evidence that AERO has generated or synthesised is developed into publications and resources that are relevant and accessible for diverse needs. AERO's guiding design principles are that resources must be:

- engaging – speaking directly to audience needs and contexts, in accessible language, with appealing design and in a range of multimedia formats
- actionable – containing step-by-step, practical guidance with a range of resources to assist in planning, implementing and assessing the impact of recommended strategies.

Resources may include case studies, reflection guides, work samples, videos and tailored professional learning resources.

Project advisory groups provide input into the types of resources that are produced and their design features.

Develop and test all of AERO's resources with key audiences to ensure they are engaging and actionable

Resources are piloted with intended audiences prior to finalisation.

Publish resources on AERO's website, disseminate them proactively and engage partners to extend their reach

All of AERO's publications and resources are freely available online, organised in an intuitive and searchable platform, centred on key audiences and the needs they have raised with us. AERO promotes those resources and engages with users through a targeted social media strategy.

AERO offers technical workshops to present new findings and resources to practitioners, systems, sectors and peak organisations, including relevant representative and professional associations. These workshops aim to build understanding of the evidence and promote consideration of the implications of research findings for different contexts. Partners are encouraged to share AERO's work with their networks.

AERO recognises that for many practitioners, their primary source of guidance is their employer, and the most effective means to disseminate high-quality research findings is via the materials, professional learning and policies of their services, systems and sectors. AERO provides technical assistance to enable key partners to adapt resources for their specific contexts, while maintaining fidelity to the research conclusions.

Observe the use of AERO's publications and resources to continually improve their effectiveness

Following publication, AERO seeks feedback on its resources via its website and social media channels. AERO also seeks out services and schools where implementation can be observed. These observations aim to study how the resources are used, whether they lead to improved practice and the factors involved in their success or otherwise. This work allows AERO to continually refine the design of its resources, while learning more about practical challenges in evidence use.



Encourage the adoption and effective implementation of evidence in practice and policy

Build a culture of continuous, confident evidence use

High-quality evidence, made accessible and widely disseminated, will not be enough to achieve AERO's vision. We must also enhance adoption and effective implementation. This will depend on both the culture that exists around evidence use in Australian education, and the support available for practitioners and policymakers to use evidence effectively.

AERO works to increase understanding of the importance of evidence use in education. We seek to accelerate the national conversation about education evidence by direct engagement with the profession, by building coalitions with partners engaged in education evidence and by thought leadership in education forums and the mainstream media.

AERO also works to increase practitioner and policymaker confidence in using evidence. We produce resources and conduct activities that support practitioners and policymakers to understand what it means to be evidence-informed in their roles and what steps they can take to become more evidence-informed. We promote common concepts and language about evidence use and establish forums in which challenges and successes in working with evidence can be discussed.

Undertake partnerships with services, systems and sectors to investigate, test and promote the strategies needed to support greater evidence use

The most effective ways in which services, systems and sectors can support evidence use by practitioners are not yet fully understood. AERO will lead an ongoing program of work on the conditions that best support adoption and effective implementation of evidence-based changes in Australian education.

This work will be a collaboration with partners, including professional learning bodies, around Australia. Experiments will test the effectiveness of varying approaches and levels of support offered to practitioners to implement evidence-based practices. AERO and partners will coordinate these experiments to allow comparisons between approaches. Results will be shared to assist partners to plan effective strategies to support sustained, evidence-based change.

Quantify and monitor the use of evidence in Australian education

AERO is creating and validating measures and instruments to ascertain the current state of evidence use in early childhood and school settings, monitor its change over time, and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at enhancing it.

This work seeks to determine:

- the level of understanding that there is an expanding and robust evidence base for decision-making in education
- the ways in which practitioners and policymakers engage with evidence and their confidence in doing so
- how widely evidence-based practices are being employed
- the barriers that inhibit greater uptake of evidence-based practices.

AERO will use these measures to conduct and publish research on the state of evidence use in Australian education, beginning with a baseline diagnostic in 2021, as well as in AERO's evaluation of its own impact.

Monitoring our impact

AERO's theory of change

Outputs	Outcomes		Vision
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ An expanded and evolving evidence base exists as to the most effective strategies to address Australia's education challenges 	Practitioners and policymakers regularly access high-quality evidence to inform their decisions	Practitioners and policymakers adopt and effectively implement evidence-based strategies	Australia achieves excellent and equitable education outcomes for all children and young people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ Evidence to inform decision-making in education is presented in a well-organised, engaging and actionable manner that is valued by practitioners and policymakers ● Practitioners and policymakers are supported to deepen their understanding of why and how to effectively implement evidence Services, systems and sectors are supported to deepen their understanding of the strategies needed to promote greater evidence use by practitioners and policymakers are more clearly understood 	Practitioners and policymakers are motivated, confident and effectively supported to use evidence in their work		



Monitoring our outputs

- By 2024, AERO will have generated new evidence on high priority challenges in Australian education. We will measure and report on the quantity of evidence generated, the rigour of the methodologies used and stakeholder perceptions of the relevance of the topics addressed.
- ▲ By 2024, AERO will have created and populated a well-organised online platform with engaging, actionable resources that are valued by practitioners and policymakers. We will measure and report on the quantity of content made available, stakeholder perceptions of its relevance and accessibility, and the observed level of success in using AERO's resources to implement evidence-based changes.
- By 2024, AERO will have taken a baseline measurement of the state of evidence use and expanded the evidence base on the strategies needed to support greater evidence use in Australian education. We will measure and report on attitudes towards evidence use, the clarity of understanding among senior education leaders of the state of evidence use in their services, systems and sectors, and of the strategies needed to support evidence use in practice and policy.



Monitoring our outcomes

AERO will begin measuring and reporting on progress towards its outcomes and vision during the period covered by this Strategic Plan, while recognising that they will take time to achieve.

AERO will measure and report on:

- the quantity and quality of engagement with AERO's publications and resources online
- practitioner and policymaker perceptions of the support available to them to adopt and effectively implement evidence in their work
- the change in frequency of evidence-based practices following selected practice-focused projects
- the reach and fidelity of policy change following selected policy-focused projects.



Monitoring progress towards our vision

AERO will measure and report on:

- the change in children and young people's learning outcomes observed in our research projects
- the change in children and young people's learning outcomes at selected sites where strategies recommended by AERO are adopted and effectively implemented.



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AERO acknowledges traditional owners and custodians throughout Australia, recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and community, and pays respect to Elders past and present.